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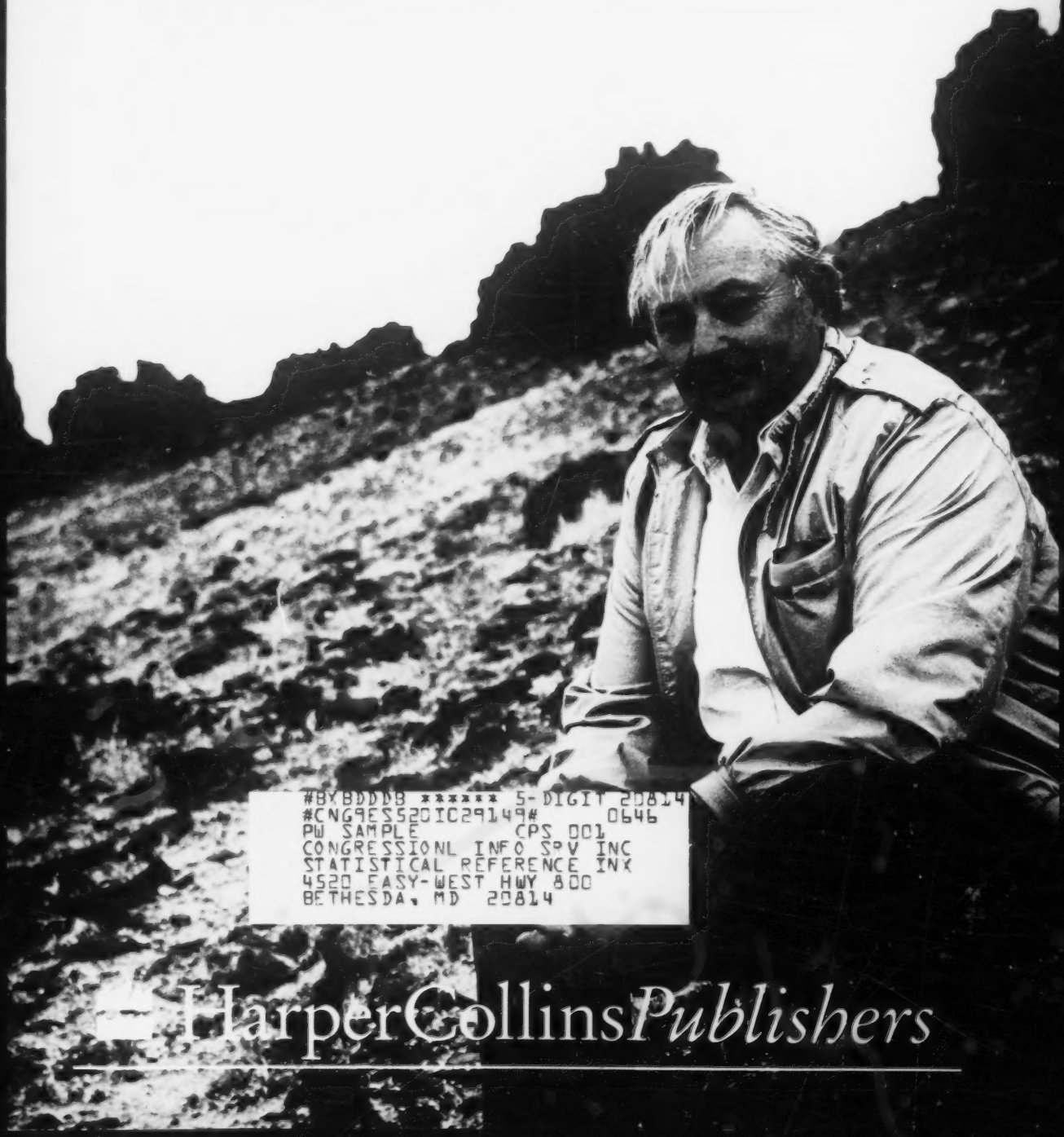

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Cheering On the Sidelines

They enhance a store's image and profit margins—but they need to be kept up-to-date, and carefully matched to the book stock

BY DIANE ROBACK

Sidelines, at one time considered a minor, ancillary addition to a bookstore's stock, have become a very important component of—and asset to—a children's bookstore. They add something intangible but positive to the product mix, and they add something *quite* tangible to a store's profits. This article is based on the results of two surveys: a statistical poll conducted earlier this summer by Cahners Research, to find out how children's sidelines are selling in bookstores around the country, and which ones are doing best; and a telephone survey of children's-only booksellers, to gather more in-depth opinions about why they stock the sidelines they do, and how the sidelines are merchandised.

The variety of sidelines carried by bookstores is wide indeed—from puzzles and games to hand puppets, plush dolls and greeting cards (see chart on next page). Just over 97% of the children's bookstores that participated in the Cahners survey carry sidelines, compared to 94.3% of other independent bookstores, and 100% of national and regional chain bookstores. In the non-children's independent bookstores, 73.9% of those sidelines are adult sidelines and 26.1% are children's sidelines; for the chains, 77.2% are adult and 22.8% are children's.

Children's-only bookstores devote, on the average, 322 sq. ft. to sidelines, representing an average of 17.4% of total store space. Other independent stores devote an average of 526 sq. ft. to all sidelines; since 26.1% of that figure is children's, this translates to 137 sq. ft. per store, on the average, for children's sidelines in independent bookstores. The high percentage of chain bookstores not answering this question makes the findings inconclusive in this category.

Total sales for sidelines (adult and children's) in 1990, for our surveyed bookstores, averaged $59,688 for children's-only stores and $73,138 for other independents. Children's-only stores had an average of $421,320 in total revenue in 1990, with sidelines therefore comprising 14.1% of revenue (slightly less than the 17.4% of total store space they take up, but some sidelines—like toys and games—occupy more display space than books do).

Scott Matthews

Always on the Lookout

Children's retailers say they look for new sidelines everywhere, and through a variety of channels. Many people, when starting up a children's-only store, join the American Booksellers Association and purchase *The ABA Children's Bookselling Resource Handbook*, which contains a listing of some sidelines companies. Booksellers in our survey said that they found this listing helpful initially, but once their store got off the ground they relied on other methods for locating new companies. The most common sources of sideline information cited in the Cahners survey are, in descending order: gift, toy and trade shows (attended by 52.9% of respondents), sales reps (35.3%), trade journals (23.5%), and other bookstores and booksellers (20.6%).

Marcia Derse, owner of The Reading Railroad: A Children's Bookshop in Sylvania, Ohio, says her store is visited by many toy reps, who represent toy, gift and other sidelines companies, so she doesn't "have to go out looking much." Shirley Mullin, who owns three Kids Ink stores in the Indianapolis area, says she has attended a few Toy Fairs but didn't find them worth her time. But she always visits bookstores when she travels, and sees what sidelines they carry. So does Beverly Gealer of The Children's Bookshop, Vol. II, in Southfield, Mich. "I look everyplace I go," she states. "Museum shops are very big for me." The ABA convention is another important source for children's booksellers, who say they not only discover new sidelines companies there, but also trade valuable information with fellow booksellers.

To Stock or Not to Stock?

In our phone survey, children's booksellers offered many reasons to stock sidelines, and few reasons *not* to. Sidelines serve as a draw for customers, who might not have gone into the store if it sold books exclusively. They enhance a store's image, and make it more visually interesting. And (perhaps most importantly) they offer better profit margins than books do.

The survey made it abundantly clear that the key to selling children's sidelines successfully in a bookstore is being enterprising—constantly searching for new products to stock, and vigilantly watching what sells and doesn't sell. That way, since shelf space is at such a premium, sidelines with slow turnover can be replaced with better-selling items. "They're quite profitable," says Tina Moore of The Blue Marble in Ft. Thomas, Ky., "but only if you hit on the ones in demand."

When asked their criteria for

Telephone research by Bella Stander.

choosing sidelines, children's booksellers, almost unanimously, said that the products must be book-related or education-oriented. Clifford Wohl, owner of Rabbit Hill Children's Bookstore in Hewlett, N.Y., echoes the sentiments of many booksellers when he states: "Sidelines have to meet the same qualifications I use when picking books. I carry things that won't compete with books but will supplement them."

For Carol Erdahl of The Red Balloon in St. Paul, Minn., a good sideline is "something special that doesn't take up a lot of space, is easy to deal with and doesn't take a lot of tracking." Other selection criteria mentioned by booksellers include: "the product has to have lasting value;" "we carry things that customers can't find anywhere else;" "we try not to go too far away from books;" and "we evaluate how much space they take up, and whether they detract from our primary objective of selling children's books."

To this end, the retailers like to carry items such as plush dolls and rubber stamps based on book characters, animal puppets that can be displayed alongside a book starring that animal, art supplies and educational games.

Creative Shelving

Our two surveys yielded the same response for percentage of store devoted to sidelines (15%–20% was the average response in the phone poll, compared to the 17.4% in the statistical survey). Booksellers say that they sell sidelines best when the items are wholly integrated into the store's stock, rather than shelved in a separate area. Art supplies go with art books, science games with science books, butterfly nets with bug books, travel bingo cards and tapes with travel books, Brio train sets with train books, dinosaur kits with dinosaur books, jumpropes with *Anna Banana* (a book of jump-rope rhymes), Madeline and Curious George dolls with their corresponding picture books. According to Susan Stadtmueller, owner of The Toybox in Neenah, Wis., "It's important to mix them up in the store, because people don't see the possibilities unless you put them out in front of them. And it's important for the employee to say, for example, 'We have a puppet that looks exactly like the character in that book.' Very often you'll clinch a double sale that way."

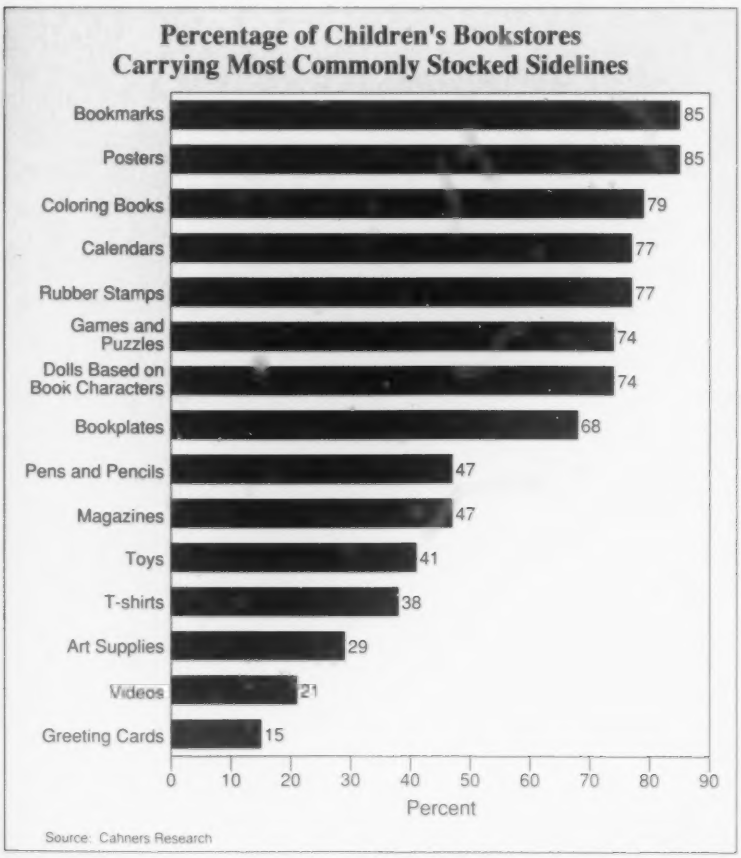
None of the booksellers we spoke with is decreasing the amount of space devoted to sidelines in their store. About half of them say they are increasing space for them, and the other half say space is holding steady. Those increasing display space say they are doing so because of demand. Jan Shoup, co-owner of Magic Tree Bookstore in Oak Park, Ill., comments, "We're selling more of them, so I guess we've got to expand." Others, like Todd Horst of Whizkids Toys and Books in Tucson, Ariz., say that their sidelines expansion is slowing. "I feel we have most of what we would want," he remarks. "We add fewer new lines each year because there aren't that many that meet our criteria."

Of those booksellers who don't plan to increase space for sidelines, most say it's because they are simply out of room. And even if Jo Michalski of Once Upon a Time in Anchorage had more space, she says she wouldn't necessarily look for new sidelines, but instead "would add more within the sidelines that we are currently carrying. We would stock more cards, for example, but we aren't willing to give up book space to carry more cards."

Sidelines display space does not stay constant throughout the year in most stores, however. Retailers tend to add sidelines during summer and around the holidays. And they frequently rotate new items in, to try them out and give the stock a fresh look, while discontinuing older lines that have slowed down or never took off.

Worth Their Weight

Retailers consider sidelines valuable for all sorts of reasons. For one, they make store displays much more lively and inviting. In the words of Gwynne Spencer, owner of trespassers william of Albuquerque, N.M., "Books are basically two-dimension-



al. Anytime you add a three-dimensional product it makes it easier to process the information from the book." Stadtmueller of The Toybox adds another reason for stocking sidelines: "Statistically, something like 50% of the population is intimidated by books. A large percentage of people wouldn't walk into a store that's all books because they'd feel out of place. Sidelines soften that image. Psychologically it's an easier atmosphere to shop in. A lot of times people come into the store to look at sidelines and we can ease them into purchasing books. If you want to add to your customers, you have to lure in the non-book customer."

Most of the booksellers in our phone survey believe that their sidelines sales are book-driven (and prefer it that way), but some respondents said that they have customers who come in specifically for sidelines, especially audiotapes and greeting cards. Window displays that incorporate both books and related sidelines are the best way booksellers have found to draw in passersby and show them what the store has to offer. Susan Malk of White Rabbit Children's Books in La Jolla, Calif., comments, "In our window we have a big Lego sculpture, with a large Madeline and Babar sitting on top of it. People come in when they see our windows, and once they're in they see what else we have."

Sidelines are a boon for parents and booksellers alike when it comes to choosing gifts. Booksellers can increase sales by suggesting book/toy or book/game combinations, and parents like the idea of adding something complementary to a book. Amy Sternberg of Kidsense in Minneapolis, Minn. points out, "For the parents and kids who come in for birthday gifts, they'll pick up something little to put on top of a book. A lot of kids feel that for a birthday they either want or should give a toy, so if they get a book, a toy can go with it."

Margins and Turnover

But booksellers also love to sell sidelines because they are *profitable*. "I always think it's the toys that help keep me in business," states Shirley Mullin from Kids Ink. While not all of her bookselling colleagues would go that far, all appreciate the extra revenue; sidelines are sold net priced, and retailers routinely double the invoice price. Sandi Gurowski, owner of The Children's Pages in Winooski, Vt., for one, believes that sidelines are sold in children's stores only because of those added profits. "They have better margins and that's why booksellers choose to stock them," she says. "Otherwise I think we'd all be purists." But Judy Roach from the Village Toy Shoppe in Fairport, N.Y., a children's gift shop that carries both toys and books, says that the difference in margins makes it "much more profitable to sell sidelines. We wouldn't wish to be in the book business."

Those who *are*, however, point out the major disadvantage to sidelines: they are sold nonreturnable. As Joan Hulburt of Wit and Wisdom in Cleveland puts it, "When you own them, you own them." To make a decent profit selling them, then, booksellers must stay on top of what is moving, so that strong-selling sidelines get reordered and slower ones don't. "The profit margins are better than books," notes Andy Pickard, co-owner of Main Street Kids Book Company in Bellevue, Wash.,"but only as long as we keep turning them over." Wit and Wisdom's Hulburt sells off unsuccessful sidelines at a sidewalk sale, a good way to get rid of stock but one that cuts into profit. Therefore, when adding new sidelines, booksellers are understandably cautious, not only for philosophical reasons and space considerations, but also for the risk of buying nonreturnable.

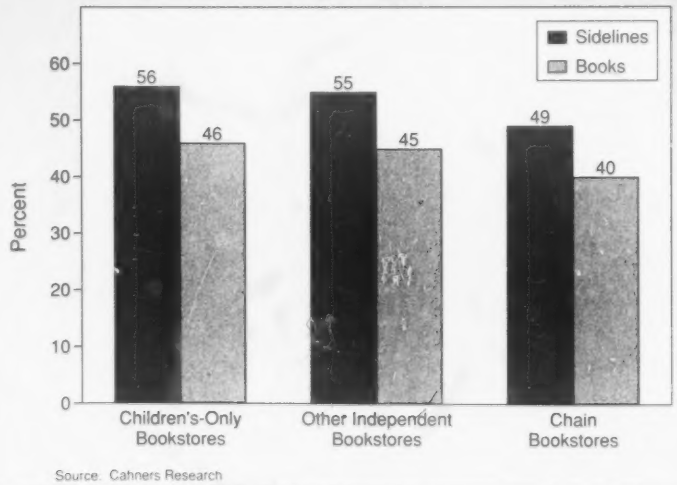
However, slow turnover is only one factor in the decision by a store to discontinue a sideline. Barbara Thomas, co-owner of Toad Hall Children's Bookstore in Austin, Tex., no longer carries many bookplates or bookmarks, saying, "So many stores carry them that they're not unique." She also doesn't stock games and puzzles, because there are several toy stores nearby. Mona Albertine of Jabberwocky Children's Bookstore in Fredericksburg, Va., stopped carrying some items because they were too expensive, and others (toys for young children) because of low demand.

For Tina Moore of The Blue Marble, shrinkage played a part in her decision to stop stocking some sidelines. "We used to carry a lot of little things, such as pocket games," she recalls. "But they're harder to prevent being pilfered. Some wooden games we carried were boxed so that anyone could open them; they suffered quite a bit from losses due to opened packages. We do better with larger items that are sealed up."

There are often specific reasons booksellers discontinue specific items: Gwynne Spencer at trespassers william no longer stocks locally produced wooden toys because the margins were too low; Marcia Derse of The Reading Railroad dropped wrapping paper because her store provides gift wrapping as a free service; Todd Horst of Whizkids Books and Toys gave up easels because "they took up too much room and were a big bother." And many booksellers say they have dropped items that are not book-related, as they have refined their store's focus.

[Continued on page 56]

Average Price Markups for Sidelines and Books



Source: Cahners Research

'No Longer a Sideline'

Audiotapes are a major component of most children's bookstores' inventory, and many booksellers, like Gwynne Spencer, consider audio a "standard part of my stock, not a sideline." Cathy Stauffer of Choo-Choo! Children's Books and Toys in Memphis, Tenn., says that tapes are important because "they round out the assortment, even though they are only about 5% of my business." Even those who still regard audio as a sideline say that audio is a growing area in their store; at Whizkids Books and Toys, the audio section is increasing by 50% a year, surpassing the growth rate of the store.

Music tapes sell better than spoken word, booksellers report. The tapes mentioned most often are those by Raffi (the hands-down winner), Joe Scruggs, Tom Chapin and the For Our Children collection. Todd Horst at Whizkids is pleased at how many "good musicians are doing music for kids, like Doc Watson, Maria Muldaur and Pete Seeger." And Sandi Gurowski of The Children's Pages offers a tip: "The key to selling the music tapes is to play them all the time, and offering to play one for a customer. If you have the sample tape and play it for the customer, you will sell the tape."

In the spoken-word category, opinion is divided as to whether book-and-tape packages sell better than story tapes alone. For Tina Moore at The Blue Marble, tapes alone sell better, "but that's because I don't tend to recommend the packages. If I'm selling a book, I'll sell the book itself. I'm more likely to recommend a book or a music tape alone." Dolores Kunath, owner of Dragon's Tale Children's Bookstore in Erie, Pa., says that in her store, tapes alone sell better than book-and-cassette packages; she believes that the packages are "too expensive." But for Amy Sternberg of Kidsense, the packages are more successful. "Just the audio is a little harder to sell. I think the packages are a perceived value—you're getting two things in one."

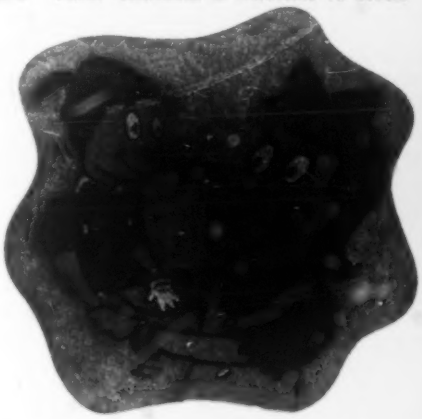
Pros and Cons of Video

Where there is near unanimity on the value of audio, store owners are much more divided over the issue of whether to stock videos. It cuts to the heart of what booksellers consider their mission: to encourage reading. "I'm anti-video," states Dolores Kunath of Dragon's Tale, "because I try to sell books. My clientele are book people, not video people. We're promoting reading, and videos promote TV watching." Barbara Andrews, owner of Whippersnappers in Laramie, Wyo., doesn't carry video either, for several reasons. "I don't have a good enough sense of what people really want," she admits. "And they are an expensive item to invest in."

Speaking for many of her colleagues who do stock them, Jo Michalski of Once Upon a Time says she tries to "concentrate on videos that relate to children's books." For her, video sales used to be flat but are now growing, and she is devoting more space to them. Others, however, have scaled back their video sections because sales are slow and margins are lower.

The most common solution, among the booksellers we polled, is to carry only a small selection, perhaps 20 titles, of the steady sellers: Raffi concerts, Dr. Seuss, Sesame Street, Richard Scarry and Babysongs. Several of the stores carry Weston Woods' line of Children's Circle videos; according to Jo Michalski, "It took them a while to take off, but they're growing. We like them because they really tie into books. It makes them easier to market."

The Reading Railroad's Marcia Derse makes sure that her selection of videos is "different from what they have in the video store. The only crossover I've seen is that we both carry Hap Palmer videos." Another dilemma is whether to stock



Disney videos. Evelyn Carver, co-owner of Kids Books Ltd. in Greensboro, N.C., votes no. "We don't carry them because you can buy them anywhere, and the big discount places can beat you in price."

Rosemary Meyer of The Children's Bookshop in Lenexa, Kans., stocks only the *Once Upon a Potty* video, saying, "We'd like to expand our video inventory, but everyone we've asked says they're very slow movers." But Kidsense's Amy Sternberg offers advice and encouragement on this issue. "I think a lot of booksellers have problems selling videos because they think videos don't fit. By choosing wisely you can find quality videos that kids like, that parents appreciate and that booksellers won't feel that they're at cross purposes with what they're trying to do. The profit margin isn't much, but it's another reason for people to come into your store."

As more and more sidelines become available, it falls to children's booksellers to select carefully. New offerings can attract new customers and contribute to the bottom line, but booksellers will continue to be challenged to remain true to their primary purpose. As Gwynne Spencer at trespassers william observes, "You can sell what you love. If you don't love it, you shouldn't have it in your store." □

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